

UNDERSTANDING REAL BUT IMPERFECT COMMUNIONBETWEEN ANGLICANS AND ROMAN CATHOLICS

Summary: In order to explore the meaning of real but imperfect communion between Anglicans and Roman Catholics, this paper notes the diversity of rites, of governing structures, and of theological schools that should characterize even full or perfect communion. It suggests that Anglicans and Roman Catholics have in fact slowly begun to relate to each other as different theological schools, understanding schools as embodied communities with their distinctive theologies, governing structures, liturgical expressions, and spiritualities. The Anglican communion is understood to have a particular charism that will enable the reform of the Roman Catholic communion in the exercise of episcopal authority. The openness of each communion to correction by the other is seen as a sign that their relationship is beginning to take on the characteristics of a relationship among embodied theological schools, and hence that their differences need not permanently prevent their reaching full communion.

The Decree on Ecumenism (Unitatis redintegratio) states that those baptized are in real but imperfect communion with the Roman Catholic Church.¹ Furthermore, it notes that among Western churches which were separated from the Roman See, "the Anglican Communion occupies a special place."² The specialness of this place has been further confirmed by the commitment of our two communions to the achievement of full unity through a series of stages begun with the Malta Report of 1968³ and continued in the publication of the work of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission on eucharist, ministry, and authority in the Church.⁴ Finally, the commitment to achievement of this unity has been confirmed by the appointment of ARCIC-II and by the joint renewed dedication to the goal made on the occasion of the pastoral visit of the bishop of Rome to the archbishop of canterbury in England in 1982.

Nevertheless, the ecclesiology of imperfect communion is a theme which has not been fully explored. What is the concrete meaning of this important theme,

which forms an underlying concept in the whole Decree on Ecumenism?⁵ In particular, what does it mean for our two communions, with their special and deepening relationship? In this paper, I intend--in response to the request of ARCIC-II--to explore some answers to these questions.

Broken Communion and Full Communion

With Jean-Marie Tillard, I understand the Church of Christ to be one but divided, visible but broken into pieces by the sins of those whom God has made brothers and sisters but who refuse to be fully brothers and sisters to each other.⁶ Despite this division within the one Church, those baptized share "a bond of communion which is the most fundamental and radical there is; the Spirit of God has marked them all with the seal of belonging to Christ. And this seal--as the theology of the baptismal character shows--is so strong that nothing, not even schism, can blot it out."⁷ In the baptismal "yes" to the saving plan of God, Christians are already in communion. But there is a second "yes," a more noetic "yes," which involves the understanding of what is implied in the first "yes." Necessary to faith, it means some particular understanding of the meaning of the kerygma. "The split inside the unica Ecclesia has its origin in passing from the first 'yes' to the second 'yes.' Though all are agreed about the first, Christian communities diverge about the second."⁸ In fact, Tillard concludes, this is the absurdity of the situation. "While all Christians together, in an irrevocable decision, pronounce their 'yes' to a plan of God which saves them by making them brothers and sisters of Christ and of one another, when they come to the doctrinal implications of this 'yes' they can no longer agree."⁹

This gives us some preliminary idea of a meaning, then, for real but imperfect communion. But what would communion perfected be like? What is the nature of the unity we seek?

If we share with the Second Vatican Council and The Final Report an ecclesiology of communion, then we understand the Church united to be a communion of eucharistic communities. This means that the oneness of its unity is intimately related to its catholicity, a universality "which emerges from and integrates diversity, not a universality which imposes uniformity and suppresses diversity."¹⁰ The reunited one Church of Christ would not mean, then, a collapse of the different communions with their unique theological traditions, liturgical forms, governing structures, and spiritual riches. It would mean a communion of communions. All of these diverse gifts would be preserved in a Church reunited. All are part of the catholicity of the Church.

When I say this, I do not mean that the many communions in the one Church would be unrelated to each other. On the contrary, they would be involved in relations of mutuality, of interdependence, in which they would allow themselves to be converted by each other.¹¹ Like a healthy interpersonal relationship which includes both autonomy and mutuality, so the one Church would be graced at once with the richness of diversity and the bond of unity.

Reasons for Different Faith Expressions

But why are there different expressions of the one faith such that different expressions of it occur in the one Church?

One important reason underlined by Yves Congar is that there is more than one authentic apostolic tradition. "It is very important to recognize that some of the differences between East and West are not just the result of Catholicity and a variety of spiritual gifts, but go back to apostolic origins."¹² And the Decree on Ecumenism remarks that "the heritage handed down by the Apostles was received in different forms and ways, so that from the very beginnings of the Church it had a varied development here and there, owing also to diverse mentalities and conditions of life."¹³

Another reason for the different expressions of the one faith is that no

expression of the reality of Christian faith is exhaustive. Congar comments, "The transcendence of Reality has to be translated into history. . . . Since no expression is ever totally adequate to what it expresses or its final outcome, a number of expressions are possible and even desirable."¹⁴ Closely related to this reason is a third: faith is received by a variety of peoples with different histories, cultures, and problems. "Christianity is subject to geography and history. The individual or collective subjects who live it out make it their own. Inevitably they express it in different ways."¹⁵ Modern theology is especially aware of this historicity of our understanding, and uses this insight with fruitfulness in interpreting critically the meaning of the Scriptures and of earlier conciliar teaching.

The ecumenical task is possible because different expressions of the one faith are possible, indeed necessary.

All the dogmatics which have multiplied in this way are focussed on the fullness of God's communication of himself in revelation and the covenant. None of them can express it adequately. The faithful live by it without ever exhausting it. . . . Between these expressions and the fullness of the gift there always remains the margin which we have recognized between every element or form of the historical life of the church and eschatology. It is in this margin that the enterprise of ecumenism is inscribed.¹⁶

Diversities Within Communion

I have been examining the foundational reasons which explain the many expressions of the faith, many expressions in theology, liturgy, governing structure, spirituality. But this examination is relevant for our consideration of the nature of the full communion that would retain its catholicity.

Full communion, for example, allows the presence of different rites, understanding a rite as "the multiple and coherent expression of the faith" of a community which "includes above all the liturgy, steeped in dogmatic truth, the images, the style of monastic life, the disposition of the churches, the presiding

genius in the ordering of church life."¹⁷ When Congar discusses the relationship between East and West, he wishes to speak of it as "complementary." This means more than seeing the same reality in two different ways, he insists.¹⁸ It means rather "that there are two constructions of the mystery, each of which is coherent and complete--although each is unsatisfactory on some point--and which cannot be superimposed."¹⁹ An inadequate but real vision of the possibility of keeping such complementary rites in full communion is provided by the communion with the bishop of Rome of both Latin and Eastern rites. Of course, we know all of the injustice and abuse which the Eastern rites have suffered in this relationship, and so it poses many problems as an example of communion. Still, it is suggestive, because it allows us to "recognize the legitimate existence of two theological and even dogmatic traditions in the profession of the same faith."²⁰

• Lukas Vischer makes another suggestion which can help us imagine how our diverse governing traditions could be fruitfully appropriated in a united Church of the future. He finds in Christian traditions four insights about governing: personal leadership by those with oversight, collegial consultation among them, congregational reception, and the prophetic voices raised up within the Church at unexpected places.²¹ All of these sorts of governing structures "respond to impulses which are deeply rooted in the Gospel," he points out.²² All "have proved their special worth at crucial moments in history."²³ He concludes that "the Church needs to be capable of different emphases at different times and in different contexts;" we need all four insights about governing structure in a reunited Church.²⁴ If we look closely, we see that ARCIC seems to agree. Vischer's argument is even easier to see today when the historicity of forms of governing often strike us.

In recent times we have come to realize clearly the extent to which the forms and manners of decision-making in all the Church have been the fruit of historical development. This even applies to the ancient Church. However strongly people may insist that certain structures of leadership were established by God, hardly anyone is any longer prepared to deny that these structures were developed in different ways in different historical contexts.²⁵

Congar underlines this point as well. "Roman Catholics need to progress in recognizing the historicity of the papacy and the hierarchical structures of their church."²⁶ When we recognize the historicity of governing structures in the Church, we can be more open to the Gospel values embodied in governing traditions other than our own.

Finally, within full communion in the Church, there are theological schools. When I speak of "schools," I do not mean, of course, academic institutions. Nor do I mean merely schools of thought, of ideas. I think rather of "schools" in an embodied sense that includes not only a theology, but also its expression in liturgy, in characteristic governing forms, and in spirituality and a way of life. By a "theological school," then, I mean not just ideas but an embodied particular form of the Christian life, with its characteristic emphasis, its genius. Perhaps this way of understanding the theological school is much like the idea of "types" suggested by Jan Cardinal Willebrands. Full communion of the many traditions, he suggests, might also be envisioned to include the many types which have developed within the Church. Within a type he sees a characteristic theological method and perspective, characteristic canonical discipline, characteristic liturgical expression, and a tradition of spirituality and devotion.

The theological schools, explains Karl Rahner, "express the variety of ways, legitimate and historically conditioned, in which finite men in the Church can make revelation their own."²⁸ He continues:

To wish to belong to no school would be the part of a proud and stupid man who imagines that here and now he can possess eternal truth outside historical time. To cling to a system as if it fully expressed the faith of the Church would be to deny the historicity of truth.²⁹

Theological schools, understood as different embodied ways to live the Christian life, have always existed in the one Church. Within each of our communions now, there are many such schools. Even within one rite, there are many theological schools. A glance at most Latin rite Catholic faculties of theology today confirms this easily. Another glance at the range of pieties and spiritualities within popular worship in the Latin rite confirms the breadth of the differences. With healthy tension and sometimes frustration, but without breaking communion, the many schools of theology coexist in the Church.

Reconceptualizing the Anglican-Roman Catholic Relationship

I have been discussing the many reasons for diversity in the expression of the faith, and the many forms which such diversity has taken or might take within the communion that is the Church. But how does this relate to our attempt to understand the relationship between the Roman Catholic and the Anglican communions today?

In searching for the next stage toward full communion, we have been making a mistake, I think. We have believed that this next stage would only be accomplished by taking a deliberate large step. Of course this is not to deny that the arrival at a new stage in our relationship would need eventually to be formally confirmed. But in fact first something else is required: it is a reconceptualization of our relationship. Looking for the next step to take, we may have failed to notice the small steps that we have already taken toward each other, at least in Canada, so that gradually we have reached a new stage almost without noticing it. What is needed is to open our eyes in order to see in fact the way in which we are relating to each other, to reconceptualize the character of our two communions.

It is hardly accurate to think of our two communions in terms of the differences suggested by the complementarity of different rites, making such different constructions of the mystery as do East and West. We are too close in

thought for that, and in fact The Final Report shows us growing in our common understanding on even long-disputed topics, such as eucharist and ministry. Similarly, we have too much in common to understand ourselves as deeply opposed in our governing structures. Both are committed to episcopal leadership. And our theologians yet found it possible in The Final Report to insist on the importance of all four of the aspects of governing that Vischer insists on.

What then is the way that our two communions are beginning more and more to relate to each other? I think it is as two schools of theology.

I see this with my students training for ministry. Increasingly, they relate to each other's traditions with respect and affection, with puzzlement or even suspicion, but as different schools of thought. By this I do not mean that they ignore the present disciplines of our division; in general, there is very little practice of intercommunion among Anglican and Roman Catholic students, and there is certainly a feeling of separate homes. Anglican and Roman Catholic students do not know each other very well, and they recognize fully that for the moment their two communities are not in communion. Still, they come and go among each other intellectually as among two theological schools.

My Ukrainian Catholic students, my Latin Catholic students, and my Anglican students take together the courses on Christ, on the Trinity, even those on human nature, the Fall, and grace. Frequently the Ukrainian Catholics identify with some of the theologians that we study, the Anglicans and Latin Catholics together with others. Other times, Anglican and Latin Catholic students trade arguments while the Ukrainian Catholic students look on in puzzlement. Sharing in common these core courses, both Ukrainian Catholic and Anglican students also take courses in their own liturgical and theological traditions for study of the sacraments and, often, the Church. With a core of commonly held doctrines, the three groups of students yet receive them differently and maintain their own liturgical and ecclesial traditions and celebrations. The three groups do not

celebrate the eucharist together: Anglicans and Latin Catholics, because they are not in communion; Ukrainian Catholics and Latin Catholics, because, though in communion, they are in different rites. They are, as it were, three schools; two are in communion.

To suggest that the Anglican and Roman Catholic communions are theological schools, or perhaps sets of schools, may sound as though it says too little about their structural separateness as communions. But again Congar can help us push this idea further. He notes that, besides the objectivity of the hierarchy of truths--some less central and some more central--there is also the actual hierarchy which we give to the truths of the faith. There is "a de facto hierarchy arising from the way in which a particular truth is understood and lived out by a group, a school . . . a given period, which is succeeded by another, or even a church and its particular setting."³⁰ Is it possible to see the differences among our communions as those among different schools of theology, each enshrining a slightly different constellation of the truths of the faith, each embodied in its attendant structural forms and particular genius? It is in this embodied sense that I mean schools of theology: an embodied way of life with its correlated governing forms, thought patterns, liturgical expression, and spirituality. Normally, we notice that each of our communions contains many such schools. But can we also think of each communion, overall, as a "school" in this sense?

Congar suggests another idea: to understand the different confessional traditions as each "a development in response to a particular charism."³¹ The Lutheran tradition, for example, would be understood to have a charism to "make clear the message of salvation by pure grace, of Christian liberty in the faith, of the sovereignty of the Word of God, and finally of a theology of the cross."³² Such a school in a reunited Church would be recognized as a school with this charism and would keep its own organizational structure, though in communion with other traditions.³³

The language of different "charisms" is interesting because today many Roman Catholic religious communities use it to describe their distinctive missions in the one Church. My Roman Catholic students from their many religious communities speak easily and noncompetitively (for the most part!) about the charism of their order. If we adopted such language to speak of the charism particular to the Anglican communion as a theological school, what would that charism be?

Surely the charism of the Anglican communion would be to witness to the collegial character of the exercise of authority. Is this not at the heart of where our theological discussion still is passionate, unfinished, and raises the sense of absolute identity issues for Anglican partners in dialogue? Among my Anglican and Roman Catholic students, their anger and passion against each other focuses on the misuse of episcopal authority. Anglicans and Roman Catholics are fighting over a very narrow set of issues; in fact, they are like two siblings with the same set of values, each expressing this dearly held set of values in slightly different ways. It is for love of the very same values—the right use of episcopal authority—that we struggle with each other in a family feud.³⁴ In this struggle, while we have just managed, in The Final Report, to achieve a germinal understanding of "the desired ecclesiology," we have not yet fully achieved in our communions "the desired praxis."³⁵ In the absence of such praxis, Anglicans appropriately seek "assurance that acknowledgement of the universal primacy of the bishop of Rome would not involve the suppression of theological, liturgical and other traditions which they value or the imposition of wholly alien traditions."³⁶ It is their charism in the Church of Christ to insist on such assurance.

Schools of Theology and the Reform of the Church

But such assurance about the right exercise of authority should be part

of the life of the whole Church. Ecumenical dialogue reforms each of our communions by eliminating the elements in them that distort, narrow, or exaggerate the emphases which have shaped us in our isolation from each other. The key to the reform of the Roman Catholic communion at the present time is the reform of its exercise of authority. Alone, it has been unable to accomplish this fully; only in dialogue with other embodied schools of theology is it gradually finding the understanding to correct its distortions.

In one communion, the limitations of one theological school are corrected by "at least a potential openness to the complementary aspect."³⁷ In fact, it is their openness to mutual correction that preserves these different groups from misleading or false distortions. Because they have this openness to each other for the correction of their limitations, at least in principle, they can be schools of thought in one Church. In other words, it is the openness to correction by the others that is characteristic of a school within the one Church.

But our two communions increasingly relate in this way to each other. Recognizing its own limitations, each sees its inability to reform itself without the insight of the other. This is a new development after our centuries of mutual hostility and self-assurance. We in fact wish increasingly to be converted by the other. "Those involved in the ecumenical movement have by virtue of that a votum unitatis, votum catholicitatis, which gives to their present belief a dynamic dimension in which their intention of plenitude is fulfilled," reflects Congar.³⁸

Is not the growing votum unitatis with its accompanying openness to correction by the other a significant fact on which we should reflect more deeply? If our two communions were to be moving slowly into a new relationship with each other, would their movement not be characterized by this desire? Slowly, the desire for unity may have transformed our two communions into two theological schools in some of the ways they relate to each other. We may have moved into

this new stage of unity and failed to recognize it. This is my suspicion.

Of course, this movement is not complete. Many of each communion continue to define themselves over against the other; many are convinced that the other has nothing to teach them; many still tend to confuse their particular theology, liturgy, governing form, and spirituality with the common confession of the apostolic faith. But my point here is to note the ecclesiological significance of the readiness for self-correction from the other which is growing steadily within each of our communions. Does this not give us some phenomenology of what a movement from imperfect to more full communion might look like?

If I am correct, then our two communions are coming slowly to share the res of communion without sharing the sacramentum instituted to bring about this communion.³⁹ If this is true, does it not help us to envision a time when the appropriate authorities of each side would confirm for us the age-old conviction of the Church: that different theological schools are yet in communion in the one Church and must therefore one day share the one bread and the one cup which are the sacrament of this communion?

Dr. Margaret O'Gara (Roman Catholic)
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NOTES

¹Unitatis redintegratio 3.

²Ibid. p. 13.

³Anglican-Roman Catholic Joint Preparatory Commission, "The Malta Report," appendix to Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, The Final Report (London: SPCK & Catholic Truth Society, 1982), pp. 108-16.

⁴ARCIC, The Final Report, pp. 1-100.

⁵Yves Congar, Diversity and Communion (London: SCM Press, 1984), p. 131.

⁶Jean-Marc Tillard, "One Church of God: The Church Broken in Pieces," One in Christ 17 (1981):2-5.

⁷Ibid. p. 5.

⁸Ibid. pp. 10-11.

⁹Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁰Jean-Marie Tillard, "The Church Is a Communion," One in Christ 17 (1981): 123.

¹¹Tillard, "One Church of God: The Church Broken in Pieces," p. 9.

¹²Congar, p. 19.

¹³Unitatis redintegratio 14.

¹⁴Congar, p. 40.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 40-41.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 170.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 83.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 75.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 76.

²⁰Ibid., p. 1.

²¹Lukas Vischer, "Visible Unity: Realistic Goal or Mirage?" One in Christ 18 (1982):26-29.

²² Ibid., p. 26.

²³ Ibid., p. 27.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 23.

²⁶ Congar, p. 171.

²⁷ Jan Cardinal Willebrands, "Cardinal Willebrands' Address in Cambridge, England, 18 January 1970," Documents on Anglican/Roman Catholic Relations, Vols. 1 & (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1972), pp. 32-41.

²⁸ Karl Rahner & Herbert Vorgrimler, "Schools of Theology," Theological Dictionary, ed. Cornelius Ernst (New York: Herder & Herder, 1965), p. 427.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 428.

³⁰ Congar, p. 129.

³¹ Ibid., p. 148.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Jean-Marie Tillard, "Schismatics in Communion," unpublished paper delivered at The General Theological Seminary, New York, 6 October 1983.

³⁵ Jean-Marie Tillard, "The Roman Catholic Church: Growing Towards Unity," One in Christ 14 (1978):220-29.

³⁶ ARCIC, "Authority in the Church II," The Final Report, 22.

³⁷ Congar, p. 151, elaborating the thought of Johann Adam Möhler.

³⁸ Congar, p. 133.

³⁹ Ibid.